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FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4520
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

SE C R E T TUNIS 000193

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STATE FOR NEA/FO (WELCH, GRAY) AND NEA/MAG (HOPKINS, HARRIS)
STATE ALSO FOR S/WCI (WILLIAMSON, GOREY)
NSC FOR ABRAMS, YERGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/28/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAL](#) [KDRG](#) [KDEM](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: PRESIDENT BEN ALI MEETS WITH A/S WELCH: PROGRESS
ON COUNTER-TERRORISM COOPERATION, REGIONAL CHALLENGES

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

11. (S/NF) President Ben Ali and NEA Assistant Secretary David Welch discussed regional and bilateral issues in a wide-ranging, warm and open meeting on Thursday, February 28. In response to A/S Welch's remarks and requests, President Ben Ali:

- promised counter-terrorism cooperation "without reservation," including US access to a terrorist in Tunisian custody;
- said the GOT would accept the ten remaining Tunisian detainees in Guantanamo on the basis of the constitution;
- welcomed the Annapolis peace process, adding that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas is "optimistic" a deal will be concluded and plans to visit Tunis in March; and,
- said there is "no reason" for an Arab League Summit in Damascus unless there is a Lebanese president and opined that the meeting might be postponed or representation downgraded.

12. (S/NF) Welch and Ben Ali also covered US-Libyan relations, relations between Morocco and Algeria, the situation in Iraq and the challenge of Iran. The constructive session underscored again that Tunisia is prepared to play a moderate, but not a leadership, role on regional problems. Overall, Ben Ali was clearly pleased with Welch's visit and it received wide media coverage. End Summary.

Meeting: The Setting

13. (S/NF) During his February 27 - 29 visit, NEA A/S David Welch met with President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali for one hour 45 minutes at the Presidential Palace in Carthage on Thursday, February 28. Foreign Minister Abdelwaheb Abdallah and Ambassador Godec were also present. The Director of Tunisia's External Communications Agency (ATCE), Oussama Romdhani, was the interpreter.

Bilateral Relations: CT Cooperation "Without Reservation"

14. (S/NF) Ben Ali began by emphasizing the excellent,

"strategic" relations between the United States and Tunisia. He continued, however, that he understood the United States had concerns about cooperation on counter-terrorism. Ben Ali said he had ordered Minister of Interior Rafik Belhaj Kacem and other senior officials to cooperate with the United States "without reservation" on counter-terrorism.

15. (S/NF) The President stressed that Tunisia cooperated with the United States on terrorism out of conviction, and said broader, deeper international cooperation is essential. Many countries, he said, have suffered as the result of terrorism. He expressed regret, however, over the human rights criticism Tunisia has faced as the result of its efforts to combat terrorism. Some governments have a "double standard," he said, on the issue. He added "some embassies" in Tunis and human rights groups had taken positions that were "not friendly" over such cases such as the imprisonment of activist Mohammed Abbou and of the "Zarzis group." (NB. The "Zarzis group" refers to six Tunisians detained in 2003 for allegedly preparing to commit terrorist attacks. The six were pardoned by Ben Ali in 2006 following international pressure.) Ben Ali acknowledged that there had been some problems with human rights in Tunisia, but stressed the GOT is addressing them. For example, he said, "tens" of police officers have been tried for corruption and other abuses. He said he would welcome the US Embassy receiving further information. He stressed that the GOT is committed to freedom and human rights, but no one is above the law.

16. (S/NF) A/S Welch thanked Ben Ali and expressed appreciation for his commitment to cooperation on counter-terrorism. He said he had two specific requests: 1) access for US officials to interview Tunisian terrorist

Noureddine Taam and 2) a commitment to accept the Tunisian detainees in Guantanamo on the basis of earlier assurances on treatment. Ben Ali responded that the United States would have immediate access to Taam. (NB. Additional details reported in GRPO channels.) He continued that the GOT would accept the detainees and do so on the basis of the Tunisian constitution. (NB. The Tunisian constitution offers guarantees on human rights, humane treatment and respect for international commitments.) Ben Ali emphasized again that on counter-terrorism and intelligence Tunisia would "cooperate with the United States without inhibitions" and the cooperation would be "total."

Libya: Trying to Improve US Relations

17. (S/NF) A/S Welch said the United States is improving relations with Libya, but from time to time has difficulties with leader Muammar Qadhafi. Welch asked that Ben Ali communicate to Qadhafi that the United States wants to continue to improve relations. Ben Ali replied that Qadhafi also wants better relations, but there remain "anti-American radicals" in the government. Qadhafi plans, according to Ben Ali, a cabinet reshuffle that would address the problem and we should see how the situation evolves. Qadhafi, Ben Ali opined, is "not a normal person" and had experienced disappointments over the failure of Arab and African unity. Ben Ali promised to raise the US interest in improving relations with Qadhafi in person or by phone.

Middle East: The Peace Process Needs Support

18. (S) Welch stressed that President Bush's highest priority this year is progress toward two states, Palestine and Israel, living side-by-side in peace. While Palestinian Authority President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert genuinely want peace, some of the Palestinian and Israeli people and leaders are skeptical. Welch stressed that all countries interested in peace need to make every effort to help move

the process forward.

¶9. (S) Ben Ali agreed on the importance of the Annapolis process, adding he had spoken with Abbas who is "optimistic" an agreement will be reached by the end of the year. Nevertheless, progress will remain very difficult. Ben Ali stressed Fatah and Hamas must try to reach an understanding. He noted that Abbas will visit Tunisia in March and there is a proposal for a Fatah-Hamas meeting in Tunis. Ben Ali said he will wait to hear Abbas' views before proceeding on the proposal.

Arab League Summit: Not Without A Lebanese President

¶10. (S) Welch asked Ben Ali about his views of Syria and the proposed Arab League Summit. Ben Ali responded that Syria is a source of concern. He said Syria is acting for Iran and the latter is fueling regional problems. He said he had met (on February 18) with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Mu'allim who handed over an invitation from President Bashar Asad to attend the summit in Damascus. He said he told Mu'allim that Syria should help resolve the problems in Lebanon. Ben Ali emphasized the complexity of the situation in Lebanon, noting the unhelpful involvement of many regional actors. He added that there was some support for inviting Iran to the Damascus Summit. Ben Ali said, however, that he saw no reason for the summit unless there is a Lebanese president in attendance. Welch agreed. Ben Ali continued the summit may be postponed, or representation downgraded from the Chief of State level. He noted other states in the region, including Morocco, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia agreed. In any event, Ben Ali said he would not attend such a summit.

Iraq: Bleak Situation

¶11. (S/NF) Ben Ali said the situation in Iraq is "bleak," but we must face it. The only party benefiting currently is Iran, and suggested that Turkey's current actions against the PKK are making matters worse. Welch noted there is some progress on the security situation and the political front in Iraq.

Region: "Explosive"

¶12. (S) Looking more broadly, Ben Ali noted that Tunisia was happy it was part of the Maghreb, and not part of Levant or Gulf. He opined that the situation in Egypt is "explosive," adding that sooner or later the Muslim Brotherhood would take over. He added that Yemen and Saudi Arabia are also facing real problems. Overall, the region is "explosive."

Maghreb: Resolving the Western Sahara

¶13. (S) On the Maghreb, Ben Ali suggested extremism is a real and growing problem. Morocco, he said, was at the "beginning of the beginning" of its problem. It had ignored, he added, the issue for too long and former King Hassan II had refused to discuss it. Nevertheless, Morocco was a strategic partner for Tunisia and the GOT was working to strengthen cooperation. On Algeria, Ben Ali, said the problem was a "little better" and may be at the beginning of the end. Ben Ali said Tunisia has strong and direct cooperation on counter-terrorism with Algeria. Welch noted that Morocco and Algeria trust Tunisia more than they trust each other. Welch agreed that there is a terrorism problem in Morocco.

¶14. (S) On the Western Sahara, Ben Ali said the Algerians

are responsible for the ongoing impasse. Welch agreed, saying the issue was blocking progress in the region. He said the Algerians need to accept that there is not going to be an independent state in the Western Sahara. Ben Ali said the problem is complex, and will take years to resolve. He added it cannot be settled through the UN Security Council. He noted Tunisia had tried to convene a Maghreb meeting on it in Tunis. While Morocco and Libya had agreed to attend, Algeria refused, saying there was nothing to discuss.

Iran: A Threat

¶15. (S) Welch noted that President Bush considered Iran a threat "yesterday, today and tomorrow." Noting the recent National Intelligence Estimate on Iran, Welch underscored that while the Iranians "may have put the gun in the closet, they are still trying to make the bullet." Nevertheless, he added, there are signs economic pressure is working. Ben Ali concurred. Welch said the chances of a third Security Council resolution are good and President Bush wants a diplomatic option.

¶16. (S/NF) Ben Ali replied this is "quite wise" of President Bush. He stressed he opposed the use of force, and that "a second front is not needed." Economic pressure on Iran will take longer, but it is working. Ben Ali added that he "does not trust" the Shia.

Invitation: President Bush Welcome

¶17. (S) President Ben Ali closed the meeting stressing his open invitation to President Bush to visit Tunisia before or after his time in office. Welch expressed his appreciation to Ben Ali for the meeting.

Comment: Warm and Open Ben Ali

¶18. (S/NF) Throughout the meeting, President Ben Ali was warm, open, and occasionally animated (at which point he sometimes slipped into Tunisian dialect). His quick and strong assurances on counter-terrorism cooperation were welcome, and may be an important step forward on what has been a troubling issue. Significantly, the President's promise was followed within hours by action from GOT officials. The key test will be whether cooperation continues and is both broad and deep. Similarly, the President's commitment on Guantanamo detainees was welcome.

¶19. (S/NF) On regional issues, Ben Ali showed again that he is a moderate. While the Tunisians will not take the lead on foreign policy challenges, they will help where they can (e.g., support for the Annapolis process). Finally, President Ben Ali was clearly very pleased to see A/S Welch and to exchange views with him. The meeting and visit got broad, major media coverage in Tunisia. End Comment.

¶20. (SBU) A/S Welch did not have a chance to clear this cable.
GODEC